

LOVE: A STILL MORE EXCELLENT WAY

1 Corinthians 12:31b-13:13

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany (Series C)

January 30, 2022

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The epistle lesson for the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany comes from *Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians*, chapter 13. We will start, actually, in chapter 12, reading the last half of the last verse, and then continuing through chapter 13. It follows after the epistle readings from the last two Sundays concerning congregational life. Please stand as you are able for God's holy Word. From 1 Corinthians 12, beginning at verse 31b, we read in Jesus' name.

^{31b} And I will show you a still more excellent way.

^{13:1} If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. ³ If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

⁴ Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

⁸ Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰ but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. ¹¹ When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. ¹² For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.

¹³ So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.
You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

One of the most surprising aspects of this passage is that it's not really about marriage. It's not about romance. We might think of it that way, because Paul's prose is kind of poetic, and we hear this passage at every other wedding, which isn't bad, because husband and wife should be reminded what love is. Everything Paul says is perfectly applicable to marriage and family. But this passage is really about life in the congregation. The epistle lessons lately have been going through the section in 1 Corinthians about congregational life. The last two weeks, we heard in chapter 12 about how each member is really a member in the body of Christ. We learned about how Jesus gives us to one another in order to serve one another. Paul speaks of various gifts that we use to serve one another. And in chapter 14 he's going to get back into that some more. But stuck in between, he teaches us "a still more excellent way." And that way is love.

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So the last couple Sundays, when I was preaching from 1 Corinthians 12, probably fifty percent of the reason I did that was to set you up for this one. Everything Paul says here about love is really about our life together in this congregation. I'll take a little liberty to also speak about love in marriage and the family. But the point is really love within the body of Christ.

What is love? This must be about the most misunderstood word in the English language. If there's one word, where people keep using it, but I don't think it means what they think it means, this would be it. I suppose that's because the word "love" is used to mean a lot of different things, and we don't have a simple way to clarify what we mean when we use it.

Some languages have several different words for what we throw into the basket of love. Years ago, I heard that there are three Greek words in the New Testament for love: *agapē* (ἀγάπη), which means sacrificial love; *philia* (φιλία), which means friendship, and *erōs* (ἔρως), which means romantic love. Then I got curious one day, so I looked them up and discovered that only the first two are actually in the New Testament: *agapē* and *philia*. Nevertheless, the Greeks still had many more words to describe what we only use one word to describe. Sometimes I've heard it said that the Greeks had four words for "love." I've even heard it said they had seven words. But it's not really like they had seven words or four words for the same thing. It's more like we have only one word for what they recognized to be many different things. Our view of love is too simplistic.

The problem isn't really our language, though. We have plenty of words that we could use instead of all the different ways we use the word "love." You could say that you enjoy, appreciate, like, or admire someone. Sometimes when we say "love," we really mean romance, infatuation, or even lust. That's kind of messed up. We're really just kind of lazy with our vocabulary.

There's also a deception here. If you start with the word "love," something that everyone acknowledges as good, and then you expand the definition, you can sneak some things in that aren't really good. But if you get people using the word "love" for these things, then you get them to call evil, "good." And if you can get them to call evil, "good," then you're a half-step away from them believing evil is good.

The last couple years, I've been hearing the motto, "Love is love." Have you ever heard that? What does that mean? Literally, nothing. It makes as much sense as saying, "Ketchup is ketchup." Obviously, but that doesn't tell you anything. It would mean even less if you didn't know what ketchup is in the first place. It would be like saying, "Concupiscence is concupiscence."

But what does it mean when someone says, "Love is love"? As best as I can tell, I think it means that love is relative. Or it means that you can't really define love. Those two ideas kind of go together. It's like the only person who can really say whether or not something is love is the person who's making the claim. If someone says something is love, then you can't question it. That seems to be what, "Love is love," means. There's a deception there. First they make love undefinable. Then this allows them to define it however they want. And sometimes they stop there, but other times they go on to force other people to call this new thing "love."

Let's dig a little deeper. Love is not undefinable. God defines love. God is love (1 John 4:8). It is his defining characteristic. Love—and I mean, real, true, genuine love, the kind of love that God defines—is a manifestation of God's nature. Love flows out of God. It radiates from his

nature. God defines love. God creates love. God manifests love. He is the supreme and ultimate source of love.

So what is this love? How does God define it? How does God practice it? If we could summarize the concept of love in one word, I think it would be this: “selflessness.” Love considers another person’s needs, and puts those needs ahead of one’s own. Love sacrifices itself for the good of someone else. Love goes beyond treating other people as our equals, to treating other people as more important than ourselves. That is love. Love is selfless.

This exposes the biggest deception concerning love. We often use the word “love” to mean that we really, really enjoy something. And this ranges everywhere from a cheeseburger to a beautiful woman. Now, if you bite into a juicy cheeseburger and say, “I’m lovin’ it,” I don’t really have a problem with that. Yeah, you’re using the word wrongly, but you’re not hurting anyone, and we can figure out what you mean.

But we still try to teach our kids not to speak that way. We were driving home from a restaurant one time, and at this restaurant, a certain three-year-old did what three-year-olds do. You’ll soon figure out what I mean. We were driving home, and I heard from the back seat these words: “I love ketchup milk.” So I said, “No, you don’t.” He said, “Yes, I do.” And I said, “No, you can’t love ketchup milk.” He said, “Why not?” And I spoke these words that, prior to being a parent, I never imagined I would have to combine together to form a sentence. I said, “Because ketchup milk is not a person.”

Now here’s my point: It is really damning on us as people that the highest word we have to describe our treatment of other human beings can also be applied to consumable products. Now if you still want to say that you love a cheeseburger or ketchup milk, that’s fine. We can figure out that you really mean that you enjoy consuming them. But when that definition of love drifts back over to our treatment of human beings, that’s a problem. That’s not love at all. That’s the exact opposite of love. That’s selfish.

It’s like when a young man says to a young woman, “But I just really love you.” No, you don’t. You think you do, but you don’t. Because love does not entice a person to break God’s command. And love does not seek to take something it cannot give back. Love gives. Love protects. Love wants you to live in harmony with God’s good and gracious will, because that is ultimately good for you.

Love does not seek to use another person for pleasure, even if it’s a mutual pleasure. That’s not love. This reveals itself when one of those people isn’t getting the same pleasure from it that they used to, so they move on. And they actually talk as if their absence of love is the moral justification for why they must move on. They say, “I just don’t love you anymore, and it’s not right to be with someone I don’t love.” The biblical response is, *Well, then you should start loving that person again, because love is not a feeling that comes and goes. Love is a selfless and sacrificial commitment to what is good for another person.* Therefore, love does not come and go. Love stays. Love is, by definition, permanent. “Love never ends” (13:8). Love is a selfless, sacrificial, and unending commitment to what is good for another person.

This is the kind of love we hear about in 1 Corinthians 13. Listen to this description of love. “Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.” (13:4-7). That is God’s kind of love. That is the love he has for you, and it is the kind of love he commands us to have for one another, most especially, in our families, and in this congregation.

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So when you say, “I love you,” to another person, think about what that means. You are saying that you value them above yourself. You will sacrifice yourself for them. You are committing to constantly put their needs ahead of your own. Ironically, this means that saying, “I love you,” is actually kind of boastful. That’s ironic, because love does not boast. Who can honestly say all those things? I can think of three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. And they say it to you. But the rest of us boast beyond our ability when we say, “I love you.” Now I’m not suggesting that you stop telling your husbands, wives, and children that you love them. That would be a horrible application of this text. Instead, I’m suggesting that when you say, “I love you,” it should remind you what God’s will is.

And think about this from the receiving end as well. When someone says to you, “I love you,” what is the kindest thing to say back to them? At first we might think we should say, “I love you too.” And that’s a good thing to say. But I actually think there’s something better. Try these two little words: “I know.” Because what does that mean? It doesn’t mean, “Yeah, I can tell you’re really into me.” It means, “Yes, I see that you sacrifice yourself for me.” That is high praise.

We can apply this to the worship of God as well. What is the highest praise of God? Is it to say back to him, “I love you”? No. That’s fine to say, but it is nowhere close to the highest praise of God. And our worship mainly consists of us telling God that we love him, then our worship would be boastful and vain. The highest praise of God is to confess, “I know.” The highest praise of God is to come with our sin, expecting that he will be merciful to us. The highest praise of God is to confess that he has given his Son, Jesus Christ, to be the sacrifice for our sin and to be the substitute for our lack of love.

This might be the most guilt-inducing passage in the entire Bible. Ask yourself some questions now: “Love is patient and kind” (13:4). Am I patient? Am I kind? “Love does not envy or boast” (13:4). Do I envy? Do I boast? Have I ever wanted something that belongs to someone else? Or have I ever wanted other people to notice my accomplishments or my virtues? “[Love] is not arrogant or rude” (13:4-5). Am I arrogant? Am I rude? “[Love] does not insist on its own way” (13:5). Do I ever insist on my own way? Have you ever heard the mottos, “Lookin’ out for number one,” or, “You just have to do what’s right for you”? Even if I recognize those mottos as selfish, do I still live by them? “[Love] is not irritable or resentful” (13:5). Am I ever irritable? Am I ever resentful? “[Love] does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth” (13:6). Do I ever rejoice at the wrong things? Do I ever smile when something bad happens to someone I don’t like? “Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (13:7). Do I? When someone harms me, do I bear it? Do I give them the benefit of the doubt that they didn’t intend any harm? And even if it’s clear that they did intend harm, do I endure it?

Love is a beautiful thing, so Paul’s description of love is appropriately beautiful, but after a little self-examination, we find that we are not love.

Who is love? “God is love” (1 John 4:8). Love is the manifestation of his nature. It is the defining characteristic of who he is. This means that the commandments of God, that we should love one another, as well as the specific ways he has told us to love one another, are not arbitrary commands; they flow out of God’s nature. God is love, so he loves us, and he commands us to love one another. God’s very nature is love.

This is difficult for us to comprehend, because love is contrary to our nature. Our natures are selfish, so we desire to serve ourselves. And sometimes we project these desires onto God. We

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assume that he must crave power and glory and riches and comfort for himself. Without really thinking about it, we assume that God is selfish, like us, but he's not. God is satisfied, not by looking out for his own interests, but by looking out for ours. Our desires are selfish; God's desires are selfless.

God is satisfied in serving his creation. For God, Jesus' death on the cross is the most satisfying and joyful thing he's ever done, not because he thinks pain is fun, but because he is satisfied and he finds joy in giving himself for the sake of those who cannot help themselves.

The love of God, which we see demonstrated most clearly at the cross, is not some overwhelming emotional attachment to us. It's not like God looked at us and thought we were just so cute that he had to have us. That's not love. God's love is that he looked at us, he saw us for what we are, he had great pity on us, and he sacrificed himself for us because we needed it. And this is the height of love: to sacrifice yourself for someone, not when they are worthy, but when they are unworthy.

To our natural minds, God sacrificing himself for us seems beyond strange. But from God's perspective, this is the most natural thing he could possibly do, because God is love.

And this changes the way we attempt to love one another. As unworthy sinners who have already received God's love in Jesus Christ, we no longer worry about whether or not our love is enough to satisfy God's requirement. God is already satisfied with you, because Jesus shed his blood for you. As long as we are worried about doing enough to please God, we can never even begin to love, because our actions will always be motivated by a selfish desire to get God off our backs or to gain something from him. But when we realize that God has already given everything to us in Jesus Christ, the only thing left to worry about is the needs of one another.

God is love. And God loves you. This doesn't mean that he just likes you a whole bunch. It means that Jesus gave himself into death for you. And even now, as he is risen from the dead, he lives to serve you, and to protect you, and to bring you from this world of suffering to himself in the new creation. This is what it means that God loves you. This love is unconditional. And now God calls us to love one another the way he has loved us. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.